

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 09
Marxist Literary Criticism

Hello, welcome again. In the previous class, we were discussing Feminism and its Interventions in Literature. In this class, we are going to discuss Marxism and its Interventions in Literature. If you look carefully, there are a lot of similarities between Marxist literary criticism and feminist literary criticism because both of them have as their objective a way to fight some kind of injustice. In fact, feminism decries looking at the binary of female and male and how that binary furthers a kind of a gender divide and fosters inequality. Here the binary is not male and female, in Marxist literary criticism or Marxism the binaries are the proletariat and the bourgeois. So what are these terms? In fact, if inequalities take place on the basis of sex in feminist literary criticism and feminism, here 'class' is a site on which these things are battled out. In that sense, both these theories have at the root a kind of an extraordinary objective, and that objective to fight discrimination is based on sex, based on class, whatever it is to root out a system of injustice and discrimination and to usher in a fair system where everybody is treated equally, alright. So, let us take a quick look at Marxism and then we can come to its interventions in literature.

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"The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

MARXISM

- Marxism is a materialist philosophy which tries to
 - (a) interpret the world based on the concrete, natural world/society we live in;
 - (b) tries to change it from within
- It tries to conceptualize the world in terms of the material processes working behind societal structures.
- It concerns itself with questions on the material conditions of the world, production, class struggle, equal distribution of resources, and dismantling the existing unequal economic structure.
- Marxism was an intervention in western philosophical discourse and a sharp change from existing idealist philosophical traditions of spirituality

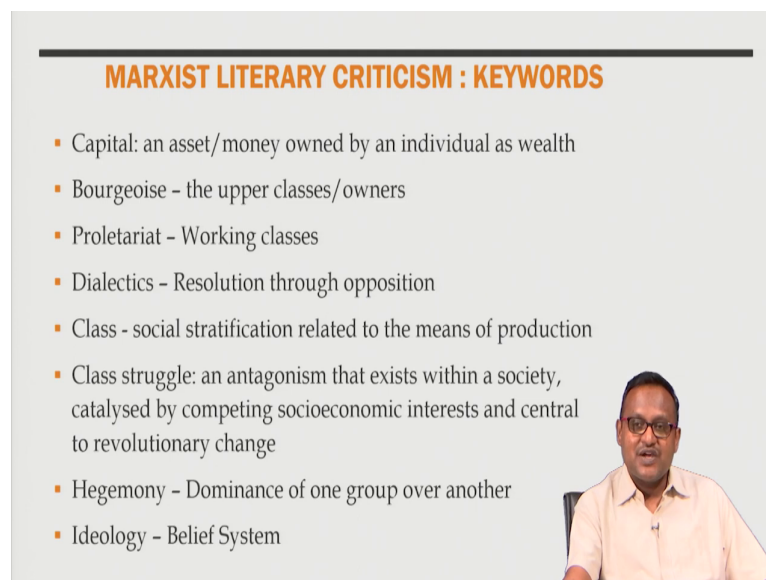
Let us begin with an insightful comment by Karl Marx himself.

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point is to change it.”

The moment you read it you become aware of Marx's basic fight with various philosophical schools or various theories because their objective is to look at the world and interpret it in a particular way. Whereas Marx's dissatisfaction is with that particular venture because he is not interested in interpreting it, he is interested in changing it from within. Therefore, we can say that Marxism is a materialist philosophy that tries to interpret the world based on concrete things, material things, the world in which we live in a society that is one thing and the second thing is, it tries to change it from within. In fact, the emphasis is on the practical dimension of it. It wants to change because it is not very happy with the existing social structures that only promote inequalities and cause oppression for a particular section of the population and society. So, Marxism tries to conceptualize the world in terms of the material processes working behind social structures, political structures. So, what are these structures? In a short while, we are going to concern ourselves with these questions. So, what are the material conditions that create a rift in society that cause conflicts in society, and how those conflicts are essential for society to progress? For Marxism, in fact, this is what is called dialectics. Dialectics is something that propels Marxist philosophy. What does it mean? It tries to believe that the inequalities that exist in society are because of class oppression, that is there is a particular class of people propagating its own ideology at the expense of other lesser privileged cross-sections of society. There is going to be a revolution and the conflict results in the transformation of society and all these things take place because the source of conflict arises from unequal economic structures, because of unequal distribution of wealth across people. Now, let us say, for instance, let us compare our society to a family. A family has four members and there are only four rotis. So, because it is a family what do we do? They try to distribute these rotis, which you can call wealth, in an equal way so that everybody gets to eat at least something. If the resources are plenty then these problems do not come, but unfortunately, no house can say it has abundant resources. Though one may be rich, human desires are so huge that the more you have the more you keep wanting. So, when resources are scarce how do you distribute them? Do you distribute it according to one's needs, or do you distribute it according to one's position, Like, just because you are elder you get to eat 2 or 3 Rotis and the rest of them get to eat not more than one. So, is it an equitable distribution of the resources? Unfortunately, society is not family because even in the family

these kinds of inequalities may exist, but not to a noticeable extent. Though families also have their own problems, in society these problems are multiplied. So, Marxist intervention is this that because resources are not equally distributed, there is going to be a conflict and these conflicts result in some kind of revolution and society is going to change as a result of all these things. And, what is remarkable about Marxist philosophy is that it is a kind of a welcome intervention in western philosophical discourses in different schools of thought because if other schools of thought focus on bringing about an understanding, a radical shift in the understanding of society, here the shift is in changing that society, that is why it is a kind of a welcome intervention.

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MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM : KEYWORDS

- Capital: an asset/money owned by an individual as wealth
- Bourgeoisie - the upper classes/owners
- Proletariat - Working classes
- Dialectics - Resolution through opposition
- Class - social stratification related to the means of production
- Class struggle: an antagonism that exists within a society, catalysed by competing socioeconomic interests and central to revolutionary change
- Hegemony - Dominance of one group over another
- Ideology - Belief System

The slide features a video inset of a man with glasses and a light-colored shirt, likely the speaker, positioned in the bottom right corner.

So, before we proceed further, let us take a quick look at some of the common words we can call keywords in Marxist literary philosophy. Let us take a quick look at them, and while doing that please remember we are not exhausting these keywords, some basic words to go by. So, **capital** or resources can be an asset including money which is basically owned by a few individuals. Capital ultimately is a resource that should be equally distributed in society, but unfortunately, that does not take place. It is owned by very few individuals and those individuals who have unlimited access to capital are the ones who create inequalities in them, who create societal structures in such a way that it benefits only them at the expense of the majority of the people. So, that is capital, and anybody who accesses that becomes the one who initiates inequality and they want to try to further only their interest, it creates vested interest. The **Bourgeois** is a class of people who have direct access to the capital who own the

capital and therefore, they are the ones who are interested in maintaining unequal social order in such a way that it benefits them. As opposed to that we have the **proletariat**. In fact, this is the binary that Marxism deals with. They believe that the entire world is divided into the bourgeois class and the proletariat class, the common class or the working class through the working class exist in the majority, unfortunately, they do not get to enjoy the resources because they are at the receiving end. So, they are the ones who should initiate change in society, so that society becomes fair.

So, **dialectics** is an important term we have already discussed. Dialectics is a process through which opposing forces clash they conflict and finally, the end result of this dialectics is social transformation. And, yeah, **class** is again an important word, here the entire world is categorized into different classes. In other words, it's a classification of society into different classes, the so-called the upper class, middle class, lower class, below the poverty line. So, these distinctions take place on the basis of class, social stratification and this is again related to means of production; that means, capital asset. **Class struggle**, we have discussed this concept. Class struggle exists in society because resources are not equally distributed, there is going to be conflict, there is going to be a struggle. So, this struggle is necessary because without the struggle society is not going to change automatically on its own. **Hegemony** is systematic oppression, a systematic dominance of one group over another. So, that they give you an idea of what these things are. And, **ideology** is a belief system and again ideology is dictated by the bourgeois class because they own the capital and because they own the capital they create a system in such a way that it works always in their favour.

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- Marx was heavily influenced by the ideas of Hegel, a noted German Philosopher
- Hegelian Dialectics – progress through confrontation of opposing ideas (thesis/antithesis/synthesis); rasa/virasa/samarasa
- Dialectical Materialism - socio-political , historical events result from the conflict of social forces caused by material needs.
- Base and Superstructure – Here, the base is the world of material processes and production which shapes the Superstructure – the outer world of culture, religion, ideas etc.
- Marx & Engels perceived the means of production to be fundamentally exploitative in nature.

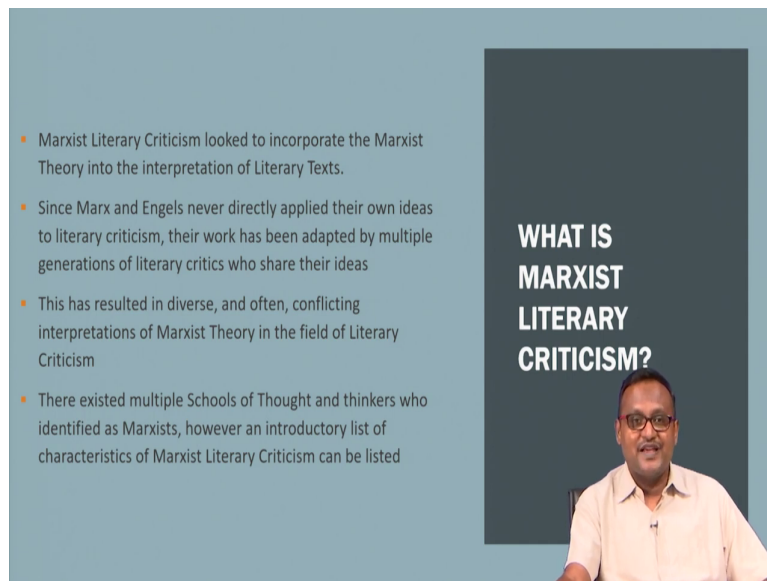
The diagram illustrates the relationship between the base and superstructure. It features a house-like shape divided into two main sections. The bottom section, labeled 'base', is orange and contains the text 'relations of production' and 'means of production (the things you use to make things, owned by bourgeoisie)'. The top section, labeled 'superstructure', is green and contains the text 'education', 'family', 'religion', 'politics', and 'mass media'. A large orange arrow points from the base to the superstructure, with the text 'base shapes the superstructure' next to it. A large green arrow points from the superstructure back to the base, with the text 'superstructure maintains & legitimises the base' next to it. The entire diagram is set against a background with a sun, birds, and a person's head in the foreground.

This concept of the base and superstructure where the binary is not so much a binary, but we still can treat it as a kind of a binary - base and superstructure. So, if this is based on an analogy of comparing society to a house like a house is built on a base you need to have a strong foundation on which you build walls. Similarly, society and its major institutions such as education family, religion, politics, culture, literature, arts are called superstructures. They are based on a base called economic production means of production. So, what is it trying to say? It is trying to say that superstructure the quality of the superstructure or the ideological shapings and contours of the superstructure is determined to a large extent by the base. The base influences superstructure and what is the role of superstructure? Because it is dependent on the base, the superstructure has to go on reinforcing the base in very many ways that are a kind of a vicious circle because it has to depend on base all these include that is the reason why I said even literature. Marxist literary criticism believes that through literature because literature is also a kind of a superstructure based on material productions, most of the time even these literary arts try to promote the interests of the bourgeois people because they own the capital, they own the resources. So, it is a kind of a vicious circle because it depends because these structures depend on base, they have to support the base in the absence of which they do not stand. So, that is an important metaphor we need to understand. Marx himself was influenced to a large extent by the writings of Hegel, a major German philosopher. So, for Hegel again Hegelian philosophy talks of dialectics. So, the material dialectics that Marxism talks of is to a large extent influenced by or coloured by Hegelian

dialectics. So, Hegel looks at dialectics as progress through confrontation, a confrontation between the opposing ideas. So, he says that there is a thesis. Let us say thesis is something, if you only foster thesis it is going to result in stratification of society in a particular direction therefore, you need a conflict agent. So, as opposed to the thesis you have an antithesis. So, there is a kind of a conflict between thesis and an antithesis and this conflict runs for some time, but it's not going to be there forever towards the end. This conflict between thesis and antithesis results in a kind of synthesis, that is when harmony comes in society. In order for a harmonious society to exist because society is also evolving, now probably it is in the conflict stage. So, maybe at the end of the tunnel, at the end of this conflict stage, there is going to be a prospect of a harmonious society that is going to take care of all its members in a wonderful, fair, equal manner. So, for that to happen it needs to have a kind of a conflict thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

Similarly, even in literature, we have something called *Rasa* and *Virasa*. So, between the clash, you have *Samarasa*. *Samarasa* is a kind of maintaining equanimity towards the end a kind of a balance that balance comes only when after the conflict between *Rasa* and *Virasa*. And, a poet goes to the extent of calling this "*Rasave Janana, Virasa Marana, Samarasave Jeevana*". *Rasa* results in *janana*, i.e creation; *Virasa* results in *Marana*, i.e annihilation. So, between creation and annihilation exists *Samarasa*, that is life. So, for life to prosper there must be balance, this balance is quite crucial. So, informed by this Hegelian dialectics, the dialectical materialism that Marxism brings forth is a conflict, a result of the conflict between two social forces that are necessitated by the material needs because everybody needs access to resources for their own survival whether it is the proletariat or the bourgeois, both need equal access and because there is no equal access it has to result in a clash which becomes inevitable so that at a later stage we get a better society that is dialectical materialism. And, based on superstructure we have already discussed these things and the base is the world of material processes, means of production that shape the superstructure, and when we say superstructure includes all the cultural institutions, all the literary institutions, all the political institutions they are part of the superstructure, and one goes on reinforcing the other.

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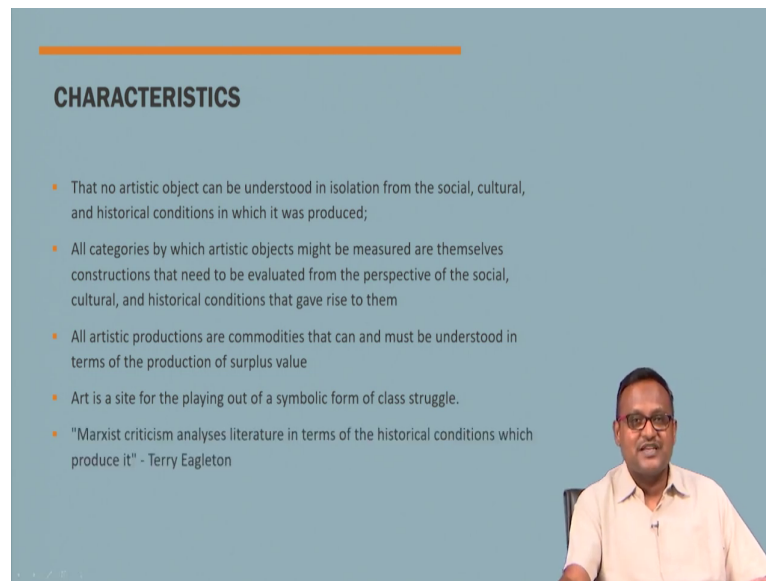
WHAT IS
MARXIST
LITERARY
CRITICISM?

- Marxist Literary Criticism looked to incorporate the Marxist Theory into the interpretation of Literary Texts.
- Since Marx and Engels never directly applied their own ideas to literary criticism, their work has been adapted by multiple generations of literary critics who share their ideas
- This has resulted in diverse, and often, conflicting interpretations of Marxist Theory in the field of Literary Criticism
- There existed multiple Schools of Thought and thinkers who identified as Marxists, however an introductory list of characteristics of Marxist Literary Criticism can be listed

And, now we are going to take a look at how Marxism intervenes in literature. Because Marx and Engels do not talk of the integration of their theory in literature, multiple schools of thought have come to the fore and all of them, sometimes competing versions of them, have come to the surface and they claim that this is a Marxist school, right.

So, though there are several schools of Marxism, and Marxist literary criticism, all of them have certain things in common. So, we are going to take a look at them. We are going to take a look at these things and then analyze what are the common things that all these different schools of thought what do they have in common about Marxist schools.

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CHARACTERISTICS

- That no artistic object can be understood in isolation from the social, cultural, and historical conditions in which it was produced;
- All categories by which artistic objects might be measured are themselves constructions that need to be evaluated from the perspective of the social, cultural, and historical conditions that gave rise to them
- All artistic productions are commodities that can and must be understood in terms of the production of surplus value
- Art is a site for the playing out of a symbolic form of class struggle.
- "Marxist criticism analyses literature in terms of the historical conditions which produce it" - Terry Eagleton

A video inset in the bottom right corner shows a man with glasses and a light-colored shirt speaking.

Whatever be the Marxist school, Marxist literary criticism believes that no artistic object is understood without its context because ultimately all these things have come into existence in the context of certain social order, in the context of certain cultural forces, in the context of certain historical conditions. So, unless we analyze all these things it is impossible to understand a work of art alone; that means, if you want to read a work of art this is where ways of reading play an important role. You may read a novel and enjoy it, that is alright, but an informed Marxist would automatically be able to trace the social, the socio-political influences, the historical influences that will have shaped the production of that literary work. So, you cannot study a work of art in isolation. You have to understand the material forces that have shaped the structure of the work that have shaped the sensibilities of that literary work. All categories by which artistic objects might be measured are themselves construction of that. So, we may use a literary work to examine something, to measure something, but if we forget that they themselves are the product of social structures, then we would be missing an important point here. Art is a site for playing out a symbolic form of class struggle, here literature or arts, in general, becomes a site in which the so-called societal struggle is played out. Because if literature is a representation of society all the dialectics that takes place in society gets represented in literature.

So, literature and arts, become a site on which class struggle plays out. That is the reason why we need to have a Marxist angle to understand this class struggles and extrapolate those ideas

and apply them to our understanding of society. So, these are some things that we can keep in mind.

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WHAT QUESTIONS DOES MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM ASK?

- Whom does it benefit if the work or effort is accepted/successful/believed, etc.?
- What is the social class of the author?
- Which class does the work claim to represent?
- What values does it reinforce?
- What values does it subvert?
- What conflict can be seen between the values the work champions and those it portrays?
- What social classes do the characters represent?
- How do characters from different classes interact or conflict?

The slide includes a video inset of a man with glasses and a light-colored shirt, who is the speaker for this segment.

Therefore, typically what does a Marxist literary critic ask when he or she comes across literary piece an artistic production, these are some questions probably they might ask.

So, whom does it benefit if the work or effort is accepted, successful or believed? Supposing a work of art gets a Nobel Prize or a Pulitzer prize or if it is considered a classic, then what are the forces that have made that work of art popular? Because ultimately, we know it very well that nothing is without politics - that is a kind of an axiom that we keep repeating quite often, nothing is without its political angle. So, who is going to benefit from this? Or if somebody wins an election, why do they win an election because they have garnered majority votes. Why have they garnered majority votes? Because people have reposed faith majority of the people reposed their faith. Why are majority of the people reposing their faith in a particular party, in a particular structure? What is the social class of the author? Because the author's background also plays a major role in his or her own upbringing. So, what is the background of the author? Because probably it believes that an author despite best efforts may not be able to overcome all the influences of his or her background. So, therefore, knowing the background of the author becomes very, very important. So, what class does the work claim to represent? We have said that literature is universal, it is going to appeal to a particular section of people, but which is going to be that section of the people who are going

to be the readers, and what values are they going to reinforce? Is it going to reinforce the values of inequality, is it going to support the bourgeois class, is it going to support the proletariat class? Therefore, there are some committed Marxist writers who use literature as a means to promote Marxist philosophy. So, therefore, they use literature as a tool to promote the philosophy, the objectives of Marxism, but these questions are in general to any other literary piece. So, these are some questions probably Marxist literary criticism would ask. What values does the text foster? What values does it subvert? Who is going to be benefited? Who has written this work? What is his or her background? Who are the readers? Why do they read it? What is their background? So, these are some questions and what kind of class struggles are portrayed in that work of art? What kind of character representation is there – all these things are the kind of questions that Marxist literary criticism would ask when it comes to face to face with a literary work or any artistic production.

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Progressive Writers Movement



- Founded by noted artists and poets like Mulk Raj Anand, Hiren Mukherji, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz
- They were greatly influenced by socialist ideology and political stirrings across the world, most notably – October Revolution
- They were committed to producing Literature that was political and reflected the plight of the common man
- They were also committed to bringing in reforms through their literature, consequently they revolted against the decadent and conservative nature of classical Urdu Poetry
- Their revolutionary zeal was reflected in their outrage against evils of casteism and communalism, and most importantly the bloodshed in the aftermath of Partition.

So, here is a Progressive writers movement(PWA). I have taken a particular interest in this particular movement because it happened here in India. In the 30s, 40s and 50s it begins gradually and later it goes on till the 60s, founded by Mulk Raj Anand, Hiren Mukherji, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others. These writers believe that literature is a medium through which socialist ideologies can be promoted. That is the reason why they committed their writings to further the causes of the socialist revolution, the Marxist revolution. They were also committed to bringing in reforms in the society apart from their artistic movement. They also actively participated in very many welfare measures, so many activities and things like that.

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This is the way that autumn came to the trees: it stripped them down to the skin, left their ebony bodies naked. It shook out their hearts, the yellow leaves, scattered them over the ground. Anyone could trample them out of shape undisturbed by a single moan of protest. The birds that herald dreams were exiled from their song, each voice torn out of its throat.	They dropped into the dust even before the hunter strung his bow. Oh, God of May have mercy. Bless these withered bodies with the passion of your resurrection; make their dead veins flow with blood again. Give some tree the gift of green again. Let one bird sing. - "When Autumn Came" - Faiz Ahmed Faiz
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So, here is an extraordinary poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, please read this. I am sure you would understand and will have read several poems discussing the arrival of autumn. So, a committed Marxist writer looks at even such a natural phenomenon from the perspective of a class struggle, from the perspective of the inequalities that exist in society. Let me read this poem aloud.

“This is the way that autumn came to the trees:

it stripped them down to the skin...”

Autumn here represents probably the bourgeois class and how does it arrive with its arrival marks the beginning of the demise of the trees, and its leaves and the trees here and the leaves stand for the working class. The metaphor becomes evident.

“It stripped them down to the skin,

left their ebony bodies naked.

It shook out their hearts, the yellow leaves,

scattered them over the ground.

Anyone could trample them out of shape

undisturbed by a single moan of protest. “

Please pay careful attention towards the choice of the word here – protest, scattered over the ground, shook their hearts, yellow leaves, helpless.

“The birds that herald dreams
were exiled from their song,
each voice torn out of its throat.”

So, birds here could symbolize literature and arts, but with the arrival of autumn what happens because there is no space for birds no leaves, the entire tree is bare. So, birds are exiled.

“ They dropped into the dust
even before the hunter strung his bow.
Oh, God of May have mercy.
Bless these withered bodies
with the passion of your resurrection;
make their dead veins flow with blood again.
Give some tree the gift of green again.
Let one bird sing.”

The entire poem is rife with images, metaphors, figures of speech, highly borrowed from Marxism. So, even a natural phenomenon that would put through the perspective of such committed writers becomes an entire class struggle, which is enacted in this short poem in a brilliant way. I am sure the poem gives you through its imaginative way, through its creative way, gives you a glimpse of an understanding of what Marxism is all about and what Marxist literary criticism does.

Thank you.